Writing Individual Performance Strategies

"A goal is a dream with a deadline."
– Napoleon Hill

What Is It and When Do You Do It?

The Individual Performance Plan consists of all of Part 1 of the State of Iowa Individual Performance Plan and Evaluation and the following segments of Part 2: Individual Performance Strategy/Goal, Action Steps, Performance Criteria and Timetable.

Individual performance feedback is a *process*:

- The Individual Performance Plan is established at the *start* of the evaluation period.
- Throughout the rest of the evaluation period, the supervisor monitors, coaches, and modifies the individual's performance expectations, as necessary.
- The Evaluation is prepared at or following the conclusion of the evaluation period. From it, an Individual Development Plan (IDP) is established for the next evaluation period.
- As the next evaluation period begins, a new Individual Performance Plan is developed, and the process begins again.

If the supervisor is following the above steps in the process in the recommended sequence, the Individual Performance Plan comes first. What can be confusing is that the Individual Performance Plan comes at the beginning of the current evaluation period, and then another is to be prepared once the Evaluation is done. Keep this in mind: the Individual Performance Plan and the Individual Development Plan look *ahead*. The Evaluation looks *back*.

In some state jobs, the duties and responsibilities, as well as the expectations, do no change much from one year to the next. In those situations, once the Individual Performance Plan has been created during this next fiscal year, it can be used again and again in succeeding years, as long as the dates in "Period Covered" in Part 1 are changed and the job duties, responsibilities and expectations remain the same. Now that most Individual Performance Plans are created and maintained in electronic format, that is easy to do.

Alignment with the Accountable Government Act

The **Accountable Government Act** (AGA) became law in July 2001. The intent of this law is to embody a results-based orientation in our governance system to maximize effectiveness, efficiency, and achieve policies. In addition, the AGA promotes cohesiveness and integration within state government by setting in place mechanisms that are linked together for consistency of purpose. These mechanisms include:

- Strategic Planning
  - ➤ Enterprise Strategic Plan
  - ➤ Agency Strategic Plan
- Annual performance (operational) planning

> ➤ Agency Performance Plan
> ➤ Individual Performance Plan
- Performance measurement
- Results-based budgeting
- Performance reporting
- Performance audits
- Return on investment
- Individual Performance Plan (Mission, Goals, Strategies, Measures)

The Individual Performance Plan links the individual performance with agency goals.

For more information on the Accountable Government Act, click on the Department of Management homepage at www.dom.state.ia.us/planning_performance/index.html.

Individual Performance Strategy/Goal

The individual performance strategy/goal focuses on results. It's important to keep that in mind when starting to write your first performance plan. The individual performance strategy/goal may look simple. It may also appear inadequate, not representing the job as thoroughly as you know it. It is neither. It is the essence of your expectations of the employee for, in most cases, a one-year period.

What may make individual performance strategies/goals difficult to develop the first few times is that you may never have thought about the employee's job from this perspective. What are the key results you expect from this individual if meeting the expectations of the job? That's all that is necessary to write a strategy. But if that doesn't quite explain it, here are a few other suggestions:

1. *How does the employee's job relate to the Department's performance plan for the year? (Go back and re-read Part 1 of the employee's performance plan.) For instance, the Department may be launching a new program. The employee may be expected to play a critical role in gathering data to plan the program. Or the employee may be one of the individuals who will implement it. One or more strategies may emerge from this type of review.*

2. *What performance measures have been established for the employee's organizational unit? How does the employee contribute to meeting those measures?*

3. *Is the employee currently assigned a project(s) that will continue into the next evaluation period? Is this project one of the employee's major goals?*

4. *Are there key components (tasks) of the employee's job that require specific results that are critical to the employee's performance?*

5. *If you had to zero in on three or four areas that, if accomplished during the evaluation period, would indicate the employee was successfully meeting your expectations, what would they be?*

6. *What results are expected of you, the supervisor? Has responsibility for all or part of them been delegated to the employee?*

Strategy vs. Goal

This section addresses either "strategies" or "goals." Generally, goals are "broad, measurable statements of intent that set future direction and require coordinated action." (*State of Iowa Performance Measures Guide*) They tell you "what" is to be done, and they are also results-oriented (by accomplishing the goal, certain results will occur). The *Guide for State Agency Planning* also indicates that a goal is:

- Important
- Useful
- Measurable
- Realistic
- Aligned with the Governor's Leadership Agenda and the agency's vision and mission statements and priorities.

For many state jobs, a goal is too broad a statement of intent for any one position. A goal tends to address statements of intent better at the agency level. So, instead, in this section we focus primarily on "strategy," or "the method or approach used to achieve the performance target." Strategies are "how we translate plans into results." They "are general methods or overall approaches used to achieve goals. Strategies do not tell you specifically what to do; they provide direction." (*Guide for Agency Performance Planning*)

For more information about the planning process, click on the Department of Management homepage at www.dom.state.ia.us/planning_performance/index.htm.

Process –oriented Jobs

Although the questions above cover a multitude of situations, they still may not address the results expected of the position in question. Many state jobs are designed to deliver a particular type of service in a routine manner. Certain tasks are performed daily, weekly, monthly or on some periodic basis, and these are the basis of the job. Results are expressed in terms of standards to be met rather than performance strategies. For these types of jobs, you may want to select the major job functions or tasks as the strategies.

Catch-all Strategy (Goal)

For those jobs that are more project-oriented, you may want to include a "catch-all" strategy that addresses overall job duties. **This strategy is not intended as a "stand-alone." There should be 2-3 other strategies listed with it.**
> *Performs job duties and responsibilities according to (insert phrase referencing PDQ, job requirements, work rules, internal policies and procedures, desk manual, standards, etc.)*

If you choose to write a statement like the one above, be sure that the employee is aware of every criterion included. It would be advisable to provide the employee with a written copy of the standards you are referencing at the beginning of the evaluation period.

Supervisory Strategy

In addition to other project or procedure-related strategies/goals, the supervisory responsibility should also be recognized in at least one specific goal/strategy. The following statement is suggested, although it can certainly be customized as needed.

Provides appropriate and effective supervision to staff in accordance with all department standards.

At the very least, such standards should include the following:

- Prepares and conducts meaningful and objective performance evaluations for each employee supervised at least once annually.
- Provides timely informal performance feedback to staff supervised.
- Understands and follows the State's EEO/AA policies.
- Promotes workforce diversity.

Format

Here is a formula you can use for stating the strategy (goal):

Action (verb) + Noun + Object

OR

(**Do**)   + (what) + (to whom) + optional: for what

Example: **Verb +**   **Noun**   **+ Object**
                    Provide + agency performance plan training and consultation + to executive branch agencies

Action Steps

Action steps are the major tasks to be undertaken to accomplish the strategy/goal. Unlike a work plan, which generally lists every task and sub-task of an initiative, here the action steps represent critical, key milestones or prominent segments of a project, all of which must be met in order to accomplish the strategy/goal according to expectations. More than likely, they relate to services that must be delivered, products that must be produced, or activities that must be completed. Keep these things in mind when writing them.

- **Do** state each action step in simple, concrete, understandable terms so there can be little doubt what is meant or if, at the end of the evaluation period, it was done or not.

- **Do** include action steps that are possible/attainable. It is one thing to challenge the employee with ambitious expectations; it is entirely another to set expectations that cannot be accomplished. These are not "nice to do's," these are things that have to be done.

- **Do** expand on or clarify the broader strategy/goal through the more specific action steps. However, some action steps may be unknown at the time the Individual Performance Plan is established. To cover this contingency, you may want to make one action the development of a work plan and another the completion of the work plan.

- **Do** include critical, expected behaviors, if they are necessary to the appropriate completion of the strategy/goal. For instance, if a new process to be developed by the individual involves obtaining feedback from other members of the team prior to implementing it, indicate that as both an action step and a measure. That way, you won't be in the unenviable position at the end of the evaluation period of having to decide how

to rate someone who may have completed the strategy (developed and implemented the process) but failed to gain input from those affected by it beforehand.

- **Don't** include action steps that are not relevant or absolutely necessary to accomplishing the strategy. This is not to be a laundry list of all the things that might be nice to include as part of this strategy. Plus, for many jobs, there may be several ways a particular action step can take place without changing or affecting the desired result.

- **Don't** include action steps that will not be completed within the evaluation period UNLESS you specify this and note how much is expected to be done during the evaluation period. (This might be the case with multi-year projects.)

- **Don't** include action steps over which the employee has no control. For example, "provide training on revised guidebook to all state supervisors." Granted, there could be some circumstances where this might be possible, but usually, the employee would not have the authority to ensure all state supervisors receive the training.

Format

Action (verb) + Noun
(Do)   + What

Examples: Verb   + Noun
**   Review and revise + guidebook**

**   Verb   + Noun   + Qualifier**
**   Review and revise + guidebook, + as needed.**

Note how the examples provided above differ from each other. The first is a straightforward task that is expected to be done. The second is qualified by the "as needed." When you use qualifiers like this, be sure that you discuss with the employee AT THE BEGINNING OF THE EVALUATION PERIOD and throughout how they will be applied so both parties are clear on about the expectation. In this example, what does "as needed" mean? Who decides? The supervisor (you), the employee, an outside party (your supervisor or the customer) or causation (a change in policy necessitates the revision)?

Action steps can be stated in lengthier terms than the examples provided above. That will help provide additional clarification and definition to your expectations. However, the more specific the expectation, the less discretion you have in determining if it was met or not. For example, if the action step is to "review and revise Chapters 1-10 of the guidebook" and the employee successfully reviews and revises Chapters 1-9, has the action step been met? How the results will be handled is discussed in the section on the Evaluation. For now, when preparing the Individual Performance Plan, it is important to remember these considerations so you don't set unreachable expectations for the employee or limit your options when you evaluate performance later on.

Performance Criteria

The first two segments of Part 2, "Individual Performance Strategy/Goal" and "Action Steps" address "what," "to whom," and "how." This segment and the next set the criteria for measuring/determining if the strategy was accomplished as expected.

Although you should keep the above in mind when determining what performance criteria to use, give particular focus to these two factors:

1) Is the criterion the best way to determine how successful the employee has been in accomplishing the strategy/goal?

2) Is the criterion expressed in understandable, objective terms that will facilitate your being able to make a clear-cut evaluation?

The following are some of the ways in which performance criteria are expressed:

Amounts and Numbers
Save $100,000
Reduce previous year's costs by $100,000
Produce 12 new brochures
Percents or Levels
Reduce previous year's costs by 20%
95% customer satisfaction
98% accuracy
Rates
Process 50 applications per week
Handle, on average, 10 calls per hour
Completion of action step
Guidebook completed
Training courses delivered
Project work plan completed timely through Step 6

At the start of the evaluation period, be sure you and the employee are in agreement about what each performance criterion means. For example, if it says, "Guidebook completed," what if the employee finishes his or her part by the timetable date, but you do not complete your review of it until after the date? Has the employee met the expectation? Or did the expectation include adequate time for you to review the guidebook and you didn't receive it until a day before the timetable date?

Situations like the one described above are rare. Usually, it's obvious if the performance criterion was met or not. But to avoid the possibility of it happening to you, consider the wording of performance criteria carefully, ask the employee at the start of the evaluation period if she or he understands what it means or tell the employee what your definition is, and give feedback throughout the evaluation period. The latter is probably the most effective method of avoiding the problem, because sometimes questions like these don't arise until the employee is well into the strategy/goal, or unanticipated circumstances arise that raise new questions about interpretation.

Timetable

Generally, the timetable is either a completion date or milestone date, although other time references may be used, particularly when they are related to other actions which the employee does not initiate, such as:

• (completes action step) within x hours (days) of receipt
• (completes action step) according to time frames specified by law
• Completion date to be set upon completion of work plan

Timetables should be treated as absolutes, not desirables. That is the only way you can objectively determine if the employee accomplished the strategy/goal as intended. Timetable dates can be changed throughout the evaluation period if the circumstances warrant it, but the changes should be noted on the Individual Performance Plan and discussed with the employee at the time they are made.

Behaviors

Though the format of the Individual Performance Plan relies heavily on actions and results, behaviors, or the broader category of *competencies* (knowledge, abilities, skills, and behaviors) are still important to evaluating performance. Behaviors can be part of the action steps, the measures, or even the timetable.

Strategy/Goal: Implement new process for evaluating individual performance

> **Action steps include:**

> ➢ **Meet with focus groups to obtain their reaction to proposed changes to current system (competency: customer service)**

>> **Performance Criterion: At least two means of resolution will be developed for each problem area identified (The supervisor wants to assure that the employee will listen to and seriously consider customer suggestions, i.e., customer service. As written, it doesn't require the employee to use every customer suggestion, but the employee does have to demonstrate that she or he has thought of at least two ways of dealing with each suggestion. In some cases, the means of resolution may be discussing the pros and cons of making the change and determining not to make.)**

> ➢ **Using customer feedback, develop revised form (competency: creative thinking)**

>> **Performance Criterion: The rationale for each change or addition to the existing form will be documented in a project report. (The supervisor has worded this measure so that the employee will think "outside the box." Documenting the rationale for each change will demonstrate the employee has done this.)**

> ➢ **Meet with customers to show how revised form will better meet their needs (competency: influencing/negotiating)**

>> **Performance Criterion: No substantiated complaints of discourteous treatment of customers (In this case, the supervisor wants to make it clear to the employee that courtesy is an important component of the process of influencing and negotiating with customers.)**

Keep in mind, the above are merely examples. There are numerous ways they could be stated, depending on: a) what results are expected, b) what behaviors are deemed critical to accomplishing those results, and c) that the behaviors can be measured or otherwise described and evaluated.

Also keep in mind, behaviors must be observable.